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For 25 years Iowa State University has required undergraduate seniors and first-year graduate students to pass a qualifying examination in English consisting of a theme on an assigned topic. A student may repeat the examination till he passes, and he may meanwhile receive extra instruction from the writing clinic. Despite a rejection of one fifth of the papers submitted, and the occasional problems of plagiarism, the English staff has never wavered in its support of the examination. (BN)

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THE QUALIFYING EXAMINATION IN ENGLISH AT IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY

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Twenty-five years have now passed since the faculty at Iowa State University voted to institute a qualifying examination in English. It therefore seems appropriate to try to summarize and evaluate the experience of those years.

Undergraduates must pass the examination during the senior year in order to qualify for a degree. Graduate students are supposed to take the examination their first quarter in school and must pass before they can be admitted to full candidacy for an advanced degree.

The two-hour examinations are of the same type for both undergraduate and graduate students: an exposition of at least 500 words on one of a choice of topics provided at the time of the examination, in other words an impromptu theme. The student is encouraged to bring a dictionary and may bring a handbook if he wishes.

The papers are then divided among all except new members of the English Staff to be read, except in the fall when readers outside the Staff must be hired. A paper which does not meet the Department's MINIMUM standards in freshman English in mechanics, organization, expression, and material is marked "Reject." All borderline or rejected papers are checked again by a committee of experienced teachers. For a paper to be finally rejected, two readers must agree that the paper does not meet the Department's minimum standards in one or more categories.

A Writing Clinic, staffed by English teachers, is open twelve hours a week for students who wish to see their papers. A teacher goes over the paper with the student, explains the errors marked and any comments, and suggests a course of remedial action. The Clinic provides handbooks, reference books, and programmed reviews in grammar, punctuation, and spelling.

Both graduate and undergraduate examinations are given five times a year, once each quarter and summer session. Remedial action on the part of the student is recommended but not required as long as he takes one of the regularly scheduled examinations. Normally, a student who fails merely takes the examination again the next time it is given and continues until he passes. However, when the student wishes to take a special examination (permitted only when he has failed the examination during the quarter in which he expects to graduate), he must procure written permission from his dean and must have evidence that he has done adequate remedial work in the Writing Clinic.

The first year that the examination was given, 1941-2, 1,423 papers were read (not including those of graduate students, for whom no records were kept until 1945). This total includes papers of students who took the examination more than once. In 1964-5, 2,853 papers were read. 18.7% of the papers were rejected in 1941-2, 21.9% in 1964-5. No conclusions can be drawn from the 3.2% difference in failures between 1941-2 and 1964-5. The percentage of failures has fluctuated somewhat from year to year but has usually been around 20.

TE 500 158
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That approximately one fifth of the papers are rejected has seemed excessive to the English Staff at Iowa State and has been a matter of concern. One thing that has helped keep the average high is the percentage of failures among students in Agriculture, 32% in the years 1955-9, though is is usually not this high. Another reason is the large number of foreign students in the Graduate College, which had 22% rejections during the same period. Large numbers of both graduates and undergraduates fail the examination the first time simply because they are careless, particularly with spelling.[1] Others need constant attention to their writing in order to *maintain* the level of performance they had reached by the end of freshman English. If members of the faculty at large do not help out during the sophomore and junior years by insisting on decent writing in all courses, then the student who had to struggle to pass freshman English may indeed suffer a lapse before the qualifying examination comes along.

As a matter of fact, the percentage of failures is misleading, though appalling at first glance. Most students pass the examination before graduation. We always have a few (around 20 in spring) who are still struggling up to the week of graduation and have to be given special exams. Three or four are usually kept from graduating each year, but most of these eventually meet the requirement either by returning to the campus to take the examination or by taking it under the supervision of some school official where they live.

The English Staff, consequently, has come to consider the continuing high percentage of failures as a good indication that the qualifying examination is badly needed. Since it is impossible for English teachers to supervise all of a student's writing throughout his four years at college, the Staff has felt that it is vitally important, just before graduation, to expose the sloppy writing habits that a student may have drifted into and give him a strong reminder that the world outside may take seriously this business of correct and effective writing.

Until about seven years ago, teachers in English did all the work connected with the examination (administering, reading the papers, and manning the Writing Clinic) without any compensation. Since 1959, the Writing Clinic has been considered a laboratory, and teachers serving in the Clinic have been given a reduced teaching load. In spite of the

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[1] In the winter of 1963, a check was made of the frequency of serious errors made on the qualifying exams. Spelling and wrong or inexact word accounted for approximately 50% of all errors marked. Other serious errors ranked as follows (1 = most frequent; 15 = least frequent): 1—Pronoun reference (usually with *this, that,* or *which*); 2—Apostrophe; 3—Verb form (*had went, was suppose*); 4—Parallel structure; 5—Miscellaneous use of the comma (including unnecessary punctuation); 6—Capitalization; 7—Subject-verb agreement; 8—Semicolon; 9—Punctuation of restrictive and nonrestrictive elements; 10—Fragmentary structures; 11—Dangling modifiers; 12—Punctuation to prevent misreading; 13—Adjective-adverb; 14—End punctuation; 15—Pronoun case.

The ranking given above may be misleading. For example, errors in pronoun reference occurred only twice as often as those in subject-verb agreement (rank 7) but 27 times as often as pronoun case (rank 15). Freshmen checked at the same time made the same errors as seniors and graduate students and with about the same frequency except in three categories. The use of the semicolon was marked much less frequently on the qualifying exams because teachers at Iowa State, as a policy, are strict with freshmen about this error. Pronoun reference was marked much more frequently, indicating supposedly an understandable increase in the vague use of *this*, *that*, and *which* among senior and graduate students. End punctuation was marked approximately half as often on the qualifying exams as on freshman themes.

huge amount of time consumed, however, the Staff has never wavered in its support of the examination and has considered it valuable enough to justify the work involved.

Support from the non-English staff has not been unanimous, of course, but has in general been very heartnening, particularly in the Graduate School and the College of Science and Humanities.

Many problems have not been completely solved, particularly some types of cheating. Since topics are not given out until the time of the examination, plagarism has never been widespread, and since papers are failed if they are not on one of the topics assigned, students have not found it profitable to bring prepared papers with them. From time to time, there has been evidence that some studens have hired others to take the exam or that good students have helped poor ones. Now students must show their identity cards when handing in papers, and this has helped as has stricter proctoring.

All in all, the experience of 25 years can be summarized quite briefly. Thousands of hours of teachers' time have been devoted over the years to the two qualifying examinations. We have offen complained, as is the way of all flesh, but we have never seriously considered abandoning these examinations. We only wish we had the time to do more to ensure that students maintain the mastery of writing they once achieved in freshman English.

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